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"Tat Tvam Asi" - Explanation for a verse of Veda

In this lesson, I would like to present the analysis of a statement in the Veda with reference to the interpretation given by two schools of philosophical thoughts based on Veda namely the Advaita and the Visistaadvaita. By this analysis, I hope to bring out the essential concepts of both the schools and validate arguments and counter-arguments with reference to Visistaadvaita Vs Advaita. So readers, with this prelude, I straight away get into the subject.

"Tat Tvam Asi" - "You are That!"

The Vedanta is otherwise called as Upanishad. "Vedanta" means the end of Veda. "Upanishad" is the term given to denote it because it is supposed to be close to the Brahman who is the only cause of the universe and enlightens us by explaining the reality, forms, characteristics, and supreme lordship of Brahman. Of the many Upanishads available, a famous one named "Chandokya Upanishad" has this maxim **"Tat Tvam Asi" meaning "You are That"**. This verse/maxim occurs in a portion of the Upanishad called as "Sat Vidya". Before going into the interpretations given by the two schools of philosophy, let me give the context where this maxim occurs in the Upanishad.

Uddaalaka Aaruni had a son named Swetaketu. It seems that the boy Swetaketu did not concentrate his mind in the study of Veda. Out of compassion he asked his son Swetaketu to undertake the study of Veda under a scholar. Swetaketu then went out of his house to study the Veda under a scholar for several years as prescribed. He returned to his father's house after completing his study. Swetaketu was full of pride. He lacked humbleness. He thought that he has finished studying everything. On seeing this nature of the son, his father called him and thoughtfully asked a question -

"O my son! Have you studied that thing (aadesa) knowing which everything becomes known?"

Swetaketu got shocked and replied

"Father! Your question seems to be illogical. Neither I know such a thing nor I was taught about such a thing. If you know please teach me that!"

On hearing this reply for the son, the father calmly told him with several examples -

"Son! Have you not seen the mud in front of the potter's house! It becomes a pot in the hands of the potter. If the mud is known, the all things made of mud are known! Similarly if you know gold, things made of gold like ornaments are known. If you know iron, all things made of iron are known! Like this, if you know an entity called "Brahman" then everything (entire universe) is known!"

Then his father proceeded with the long Sat Vidya explanation, explaining the Brahman. He said

" (**Sat Eva Sowmya Edamagre Aasit**) in the beginning, which is before creation of the universe, the "Sat" alone existed. It wished to become many - which is the manifold universe. It created three divinities and entered into them. From it, the entire universe composed of all sentient and insentient entities was created. Sat then entered into all such things created by him from him and became the universe."

He continued and concluded

"(**Aatma Tat Tvam Asi Swetaketo**) - O Son! Sat is the Aatma (Soul). You are That!".

Thus ends the teaching present in the Sat Vidya of Chandokya Upanishad. This is the context in the Upanishad wherein the maxim verse that is to be discussed occurs.

Let us now see the interpretations of Advaita and Visistaadvaita and then proceed to arguments and counter-arguments between the two in ascertaining the purport of the verse under discussion.

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Readers! - Let us examine the verse "Tat Tvam Asi" from the standpoint of **Shree Adi Sankara** who is regarded as the greatest preceptor as far as Advaita School of philosophy is concerned. Advaita's key concept is "**Nirvishesha Chin Maatram Brahma**" meaning the Brahman is not qualified by any characteristics (attributes) but only knowledge-self is reality and nothing other than this Brahman is existing. The Brahman is obstructed/covered by *Avidya* (which cannot be expressed in words but is of nature opposite to knowledge-self) and appears as Jeevatman and thereby creating a false appearance of universe having *bheda* (difference). Once the Jeevatman (who is Brahman covered by *Avidya*) realizes that he is only the Brahman that is without any attributes and only knowledge-self reality and nothing other than this Brahman is true (merely by studying and getting knowledge from the Abhedha Sruti), then he attains liberation called Jeevan-mukti. He gets out of *Avidya* thus liberated - He gets his false impression of *bheda* removed and this is liberation.

Shree Aadi Sankara has classified certain verses of Veda as "Maha Vakyas" (eg., Tat Tvam Asi) and argues that only these are authoritative. He says that the Veda gets significance as authority only when it teaches something which is not known by any other authority. *Bheda* (difference) is known through sense organs itself (*pratyaksha pramaanam*). *Abhedha* (identity) is known only through the Veda. Therefore the Veda's meaning is only Advaita. The *Bheda srutis* are not important and only talk about the false *bheda* when *Avidya* covers the Brahman.

Shree Aadi Sankara interprets this verse "Tat Tvam Asi" to mean "The Jeeva and the Brahman are identical and there is not difference between them and as such is the reality". This is also a literal interpretation. Shree Adi Sankara has accepted "Swaroopam Iykyam" that is absolute identity in reality between Jeevaatman and Paramaatman (Brahman) and has ruled out difference.

The verse "Tat Tvam Asi" has three words in it. They are "Tat", "Tvam" and "Asi".

"Tat" denotes the Brahman that is held as the absolute cause of the universe. It is ascertained in this Sat Vidya that Brahman is the material cause of the universe and the instrumental cause of the universe. Material cause is the one that undergoes change to become the effect. For example, mud is the material cause for the pot. The instrumental cause is the one that brings out the effect by his wish and action. For example, the potter is the instrumental cause in making the pot. Here in this Vedanta, the Brahman is held as both material cause and as the instrumental cause and the universe is the effect. The comparison of mud, gold, iron etc denotes that the Brahman is the material cause. Brahman's wish to become many and hence his creation denotes that Brahman is the instrumental cause also. Further it is stated that knowing Brahman, everything becomes known. This ascertains the Brahman as material cause for the universe. Therefore the term "Tat" denotes Brahman who is qualified by characteristics like being the cause of the universe, greatest in terms of reality, form attributes and unparalleled - unsurpassed supreme lordship, having the entire universe as its body/mode, having infinite divine qualities, untouched by all impurities etc.

The term "Tvam" denotes the Jeeva (here Swetaketu) who is finite, bound by its own karma and suffering in the material world. These two entities appear to be two different entities as their nature/reality and characteristics are contradictory in nature to one another. But still, the Veda Verse "Tat Tvam Asi" conveys identity of the two entities. Further the "Brahman" is declared as the material cause without a second entity. This means that we have to negate the qualities of the two entities as discussed above and accept the identity of them that is only the knowledge-self reality without any attributes/qualities.

Shree Adi Sankara also quotes from the Veda "[Niranjanaha](#) etc" and "[Nethi Nethi](#)" in favor of negating the qualities of Brahman. Thus Shree Adi Sankara interprets this verse and argues that "Brahman which is only knowledge-self reality is without a second entity - Brahman is not having any characteristics". Therefore Advaita purely talks about the identity of Paramaatman and the Jeevaatman and says that the Jagat is "Mityaa" - "Illusion" like the mirage in the desert. In this context, the Brahma Sutras in the fourth paada of first chapter of "JagatVasitvaatadhikarana" namely "[Prathignyaa Sidherlingam Aasmarathyaha](#)", "[Utkramishyata Yevam Bhaavaatthiowdalomi](#)" and "[Avasthiterithi Kaasakrtshnaha](#)" are interpreted by Shree Adi Sankara in accordance with his Advaita philosophy. These sutras will be explained in future lessons.

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"Tat Tvam Asi" - interpretation by Visistadvaita school

We now take up the interpretation given by the Visistadvaita School of philosophy for the Vedic verse "Tat Tvam Asi".

As told earlier, "Tat" denotes "Brahman" and "Tvam" denotes the "Jeeva" as per the discussion above regarding individual qualities associated with them. These two appear different entities but the verse ascertains identity of them. This identity is not the identity in nature-reality (Swaroopa) as told by Shree Adi Sankara. "Tat" denotes the "Brahman" who is attributed with characteristics like being the only cause of universe, having the universe as his body etc. The term "Tvam" also denotes the same "Brahman" who is attributed by Jeeva (here Swetaketu) as his body.

Therefore "You are That" means "O Jeeva! (Here O Swetaketu!) You are the body/mode of the Brahman who is the cause of the universe and has got the entire universe as his body".

Readers! I think this needs more explanation. I explain it in detail as follows as it is bit technical and you need to follow it carefully! There is a concept called "Saamaanaadhikaranyam" (explained in [lesson 11](#)) in Sanskrit language. It is a grammatical concept, which I will explain now before explaining in detail the explanation given by Visistadvaita regarding the verse "Tat Tvam Asi". The understanding of this grammatical concept is required for further discussion and that is why I am explaining it.

Paanini explains this concept in his grammatical treatise. Bhagavat Raamaanuja follows the same explanation and has explained this concept in his celebrated work called "Vedarth Sangraham" as

"Saamaanaadhikaranyam Hi Idvayoho Padayoho Prakaara Idvaya Mukena Ekaartha Nishtatvam".

The meaning of this runs as follows:

"When two (or more) words denote the same object by denoting the object through the each of the different qualities of the object, then those words are called "Many words denoting an object by its various aspects/modes"

otherwise called in Sanskrit as "Saamaanaadhikaranyam". We can understand this concept by an example as follows:

Consider the Sanskrit words " **Swethaha Samudrotbhavaha Shankaha mama vastuhu** " All these three words denotes an object that is mine. It is a "conch shell - Shankaha". The term "Swethaha" denotes the conch shell by its quality "Whiteness". The term "Samudrotbhavaha" denotes the same object by its quality of being born from the sea. It is not necessary that those objects which are white should be born from sea and the vice-

versa - still here in this group of words, the words end up to convey the same object by denoting it by its different qualities/attributes. Thus is the concept of Saamaanaadhikaranyam explained.

Now we will apply this to the Veda verse under discussion "Tat Tvam Asi". "Tat" is a word that denotes the "Brahman" by the qualities of Brahman like being the cause of the universe, having the universe as his body, infinite etc. "Tvam" is a word again denoting the same "Brahman" by the quality of Brahman which is having Swetaketu (Jeeva) as His body. This is how the Veda here talks about both the entities (Paramaatman (Brahman) and the Jeevaatman) by Saamaanaadhikaranyam.

In the example quoted to understand Saamaanaadhikaranyam, when the conch shell was denoted by the word "Swethaha", whiteness is not the conch shell but only a quality possessed by the conch shell inseparably. Similarly when the conch shell was denoted by the word "Samudrotbhavaha", being born from sea is not the conch shell but only a quality possessed inseparably by the conch shell. Like this, "being the cause of universe", "having the universe as body" etc are attributes/qualities possessed by the Brahman which are different from Brahman who possesses them. Similarly, the Jeeva is an attribute (body/mode) of Brahman who is different from Brahman but is inseparable from Brahman. The word "Tat" denotes the Brahman by his qualities like "Being the cause of the universe", "having the universe as his body/mode" etc. The word "Tvam" also denotes the same Brahman by his quality of having the Jeeva as his body/mode. This is how the "identity" is conveyed by the verse "Tat Tvam Asi" and it is not the identity of nature-reality (swarupa) as told by Shree Adi Sankara as per Advaita.

I hope that the explanation of Saamaanaadhikaranyam and its application in interpreting "Tat Tvam Asi" as per Visistaadvaita is now clear. Though the Advaita also used saamaanadhikaranaya here in this context, it does not hold well as per their identity in nature-reality (swarupa) of Brahman and Jeeva. The Advaita application of saamaanadhikaranyam violates the rule of the same as they negate the qualities to establish identity whereas saamaanadhikaranyam is based on qualities as we saw its definition. Therefore the application of saamaanadhikaranyam by Visistaadvaita alone is in accordance with the Saastra. Thus is the interpretation of "Tat Tvam Asi" by Visistaadvaita.

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Arguments & Counter-arguments in this Context

Satakopa Namalvar, Bhagavat Yaamunachaarya, Shree Bhagavat Raamaanuja, Shreemath Vedanta Maha Desikan are notable personalities who have elaborately dealt with refuting the Advaita philosophy and establishing Visistaadvaita philosophy. Shree Raamaanuja has objected Advaita using the Veda as authority and also logic wherein he has mentioned seven objections against Advaita called "Sapta-Vidha-Anupapathi", pointing out mistakes in Advaita. Shreemath Vedanta Maha Desikan has dealt with refuting Advaita and establishing Visistaadvaita in this celebrated masterpiece called "Satha Dhushini"

wherein he has raised hundred objections against Advaita for which Advaita scholars are not able to answer even for one objection. Further the same scholar of extraordinary intelligence and logical power has written a book called "Para Matha Bhangam" wherein he refutes Advaita and many other illogical schools of thought in philosophy and establishes Visistaadvaita. I am not going into the details of the above mentioned refutations but only going to present to you some basic refutations as essence from them.

Now a basic question arises! -

Why should we refute other philosophical schools of thoughts?

The answer is simple. We do not have any intention to hurt other people's feelings by refuting their philosophical school of thought. Our intention is only to ascertain that the only purport of Veda is Visistaadvaita Shree Vaishnavam and it is the only logically correct philosophy that has got universal approach that is not at all a sectarian philosophical school of thought. It to be noted that in debates, arguments, and counter-arguments favoring something and refuting another thing is the basis to ascertain theories based on a premise. The basic objection in the form of a question against Advaita is

"Why should the Brahman get obstructed/covered by Avidya? Advaita says Brahman is pure knowledge-self reality without a second entity and without any attributes. Advaita is that which cannot be explained in words but of nature opposed to knowledge-self. How can the pure knowledge-self-reality Brahman be obstructed by Avidya which is of opposite nature to knowledge? If Avidya's nature itself is to argued that it is of obstructing Brahman and create false illusion of universe composed of living and non-living things, then a serious controversy arises. That is, Brahman according to Advaita is without a second entity. Then from where this Avidya came to cover Brahman and create illusion? If Avidya too has to be accepted as an entity, then the basis of Advaita gets shaken - "Chin Maatram Brahma" "Brahman is without a second entity" is getting contradicted. If they argue that Avidya is not a second entity then it should be an attribute of Brahman. If so "Nirguna" "Brahman is without any attributes" is getting contradicted."

Readers! You may just think over this - why should the real Brahman get itself into the cover of Avidya and should create a mere illusion that is unreal as Jeeva and matter? Why should then after get trapped like this, attempt for liberation from this? If liberation is needed, then the entity to get liberated in Advaita is the Brahman itself! Why should the Brahman suffer in illusion of Jeeva? Advaita says the universe is unreal, as it is only an illusion. So the Brahman does not suffer. This is not acceptable because the universe is the creation of the Brahman as per the Veda and the process of creation is described by it in detail. Saying that the universe is unreal is contradictory to perception through our sense organs also. The real Brahman has no necessity to create an unreal universe and then attempt to get liberated from it.

Now consider logic. If Avidya covers the Brahman and creates illusion as Jeeva and matter, then is a part of Brahman covered or the entire Brahman is covered? The Brahman has not parts. If it covers the Brahman then it should block the self-illuminating knowledge - self-reality Brahman. This "self-illuminating" is not considered as an attribute of Brahman as it is told by Advaita that Brahman has no qualities. That means Avidya obstructs the knowledge-self-reality (swarupa) itself and creates the illusion. Therefore the entity called "Brahman" itself is lost when Avidya covers it and cannot be established.

Advaita now counter-argues that the same objection is possible to be raised against Visistaadvaita also. In Visistaadvaita, the Jeevaatman is knowledge-self-reality, finite in nature. The Jeevaatman gets bound in his Karma (results of his action) in the material world and forgets who he is and thinks he is the body and suffers in the material world. Advaita says during this phase, the entity "Jeevaatman" itself is lost and it cannot be established.

Visistaadvaita refutes this by saying that the karma does not cover the knowledge-self-finite reality of Jeevaatman but only makes his attribute knowledge to contract according to his karma. Visistaadvaita accepts qualities possessed by Brahman, Jeevaatman and matter. Therefore the contraction in the attribute-knowledge makes the Jeevaatman to forget his reality and suffer in the material world as per his karma.

The Advaita cannot take this refutation as "answer" for the objection raised by us because it does to recognize Brahman with qualities. The Veda says that the Brahman is "Niranjanaha etc". Brahman is called "Nirguna" (without attributes) for it does not possess bad qualities or qualities of material world or qualities that Jeeva has like karma. This does not mean that the Brahman is totally devoid of all qualities. It has qualities that are unique to it that are divine and infinite. If Brahman is to be taken devoid of all qualities, then numerous Vedic verses proclaiming that Brahman has divine infinite qualities become meaningless. This cannot happen. Further "Nethi Nethi" in the Veda does not negate the qualities of Brahman after saying them. Its meaning is "It is not only this much! Brahman is infinite with infinite divine qualities"

If Brahman itself becomes the Jeeva & matter by illusion, then the bad qualities of Jeeva (being bound by karma, sufferings etc) and matter (satva, rajas, tamas and changing nature) are applicable to Brahman. The Veda proclaims that Brahman is "Untouched by all impurities". This "proclaim" will be meaningless if Brahman by reality becomes Jeeva/matter. Still the Veda has declared Brahman as the material cause of the universe. Material cause is the one that undergoes change to become an effect. The Veda conveys the nature-reality of Brahman by the term "Satyam". This means "Nirvikaratvam" "Unchanging" nature.

If the Brahman is also declared as material cause, don't you think there is a contradiction here?

In fact there is no contradiction. Before creation, subtle Chit & Achit entities as his body attributed the Brahman. The Brahman wished to create and expanded the subtle entities by giving expanded forms, names, gender, class etc. He gave the Chit, form name etc., as per the Chit's individual karma that has no beginning. Therefore the Brahman is impartial in his creation. After creating, the Brahman entered into all the Chit and Achit entities (sentient and insentient entities) and got attributed by them as his body. Therefore the same Brahman attributed by subtle Chit-Achit entities (before creation) as his body became attributed by expanded Chit-Achit entities as his body (After Creation). This is the reason why the Brahman is declared as the material cause of the universe. Therefore creation is this which is wished and done by him as expansion of his body which is Chit & Achit entities. As he wished and created, he is also the instrumental cause of the universe. As the Veda declares that Brahman is all-powerful with transcendental divine powers, he needs not accessories in the process of creation. The Vedas says that the sentient (Chit - Jeeva) and the insentient (Achit - matter) and the Brahman (Isvara - Paramaatman) are always eternal and has no beginning or middle or end. This ascertains the subtle and expanded states of his body. It has to be carefully noted that only the Brahman's form (body) undergoes the contraction and expansion as destruction and creation of universe and not his reality (Swaroopa). Therefore the Brahman is material cause and also is of unchanging nature. Thus there is no contradiction.

As the Brahman is the soul of the universe, he remains untouched by the qualities of the universe (chit & achit) as it is his body. Let me explain the nature of body and soul in detail. Soul is the one that eternally and inseparably supports controls and owns the body for its purpose. Body is the one that is eternally and inseparably supported, controlled and owned by the soul and exists for the purpose of the soul. This is the definition of soul and body respectively. Generally when I say "body", the picture of it which comes to a person's mind is "that which has head, legs, hands etc.". If you take the body of a snake, it does not possess legs hands etc as it is found in human body. The body's physical form thus varies from species to species. Therefore the definition is not in terms of these physical natures but only of the definition given above holds good as far as the soul-body relationship is concerned.

The Vedas talk about identity of Brahman & Universe by Abheda Sruthi Verses. The same Vedas talk about the categorical difference between the Brahman & Universe by Bheda Sruthi Verses. There appears that a contradiction is present. But there is no contradiction when both these types of Veda Verses are synchronized using Gataka Sruthi that talks explicitly the body-soul relation ship between Brahman and the universe. When the Gataka Sruthi is used to synchronize, the abheda sruthi verses tell that nothing other than the Brahman qualified by the universe as his body exists. In the same way when the Gataka sruthi verses are used to synchronise, the bheda sruthi verses tell that the Brahman who is the soul of the universe is different from the universe which is his body - as body and soul are different entities but they are inseparably related. Therefore the entire Veda is without contradiction and only conveys one meaning that is the Visistaadvaita. Thus Visistaadvaita explains the verse "Tat Tvam Asi". Advaita views regarding the same are refuted and rejected as they are not in accordance with entire Veda and also contradict logical reasoning.

Conclusion

To conclude this lesson, I would like to say that the Saastras especially the Veda that is the ultimate authority of knowledge, is a vast source. It needs to be studied with its six accessories properly and practiced and interpreted without pride and prejudice. Only then the purport of it can be ascertained. Visistaadvaita Shree Vaishnavam is the only school of philosophy that has ascertained the purport of the entire Veda. I would like to request the readers to kindly send their valuable comments and suggestions to me regarding this article. Reader's question and doubts are also welcome.